

CALL A MEETING WITH YOUR WRITING TEACHER SELF

Ruth Culham

Writing is on everyone's mind these days. And it's high time, too, because the subject has barely been on the educational radar since the 1980s, when Donald Graves (1983) and Donald Murray (1985) burst onto the scene with their seminal works on writing process, forever changing the way writing should be taught. Thanks to those great thinkers, and to a host of other researchers and practitioners who followed, we know that writing is not a linear series of prescribed steps. Yes, there are typical stages writers go through as they compose, but writing itself is a highly individual, creative process that requires the writer to grapple with thoughts and get them down in a clear and coherent way. During the 1980s, we discovered that writing is far more than spelling, grammar, and handwriting—far more—and we shifted to a more process-centered approach to instruction. Or did we?

Years later, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) published *The Neglected "R,"* a bold report on the state of writing instruction, which made it clear that the quality of writing instruction was not at the level it needed to be in order for students to write well enough to succeed in college and in life. The report made a compelling case for writing teachers to teach students that writing should be about learning *how* to think, not *what* to think:

Writing is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities, and make valid and accurate distinctions. (p. 13)

In other words, writing is a process, yes, but it is as much a process of gathering, sorting, considering, and reflecting on ideas and information as a process of prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. As such, writing instruction shouldn't be reduced to unrealistic schedules, rigid word counts, and organizational formulas. Instead, it should honor the complexities of thought that each student brings to the table, regardless of his or her skill level, home language, or test scores.

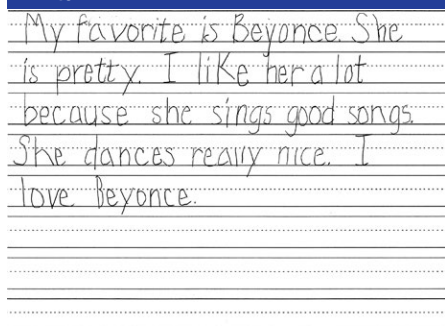
It can't be boiled down to a Monday through Friday writing schedule, a color-coded system for sentences, or an organizational formula. It's developing the intricacies of thinking found in each writer's work that is the goal; it's not how closely he or she followed the directions or produced cleanly edited prose. Writing is the key to understanding what our students know and where they could possibly go next.

If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write. (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003, p. 9)

In the landmark report *The Neglected "R,"* the National Commission on Writing called for a

The department editor welcomes reader comments. Ruth Culham is an author and consultant for the Culham Writing Company, Beaverton, Oregon, USA; e-mail ruth@culhamwriting.com.

Figure 1 "Beyoncé" by a First-Grade Writer



Free Printables for K-12 Education www.STUDENTHANDOUTS.com

revolution in writing instruction; unfortunately, few listened. The day-to-day practice of writing teachers hardly changed, as evidenced by 2011 results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) grade 8 and grade 12 testing (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Those results revealed that only 27% of eighth graders and 27% of 12th graders were proficient in writing. And of that 27%, only 3% were advanced—in both grades. This means 73% of students in these grades were unable to compose competently by the time they entered and left high school. Dismal. And deeply disturbing.

Fast forward to 2015. Whether you are in a Common Core state or not, new tests loom—tests that use writing as the indicator of learning—and educators at all levels are scrambling. Good. Maybe, finally, these tests (love them or hate them) will spur the much-needed revolution in writing instruction. Let's face it: We haven't made significant progress in writing instruction reform up to this point. NAEP results and decades of writing assessments in individual states at different grade levels reveal that we simply don't have our collective act together in writing instruction. From kindergarten through 12th grade, our students are paying

dearly for the lack of building one year's instruction upon the next, demanding increasing complexity as we go, and supporting student writing in smart, meaningful ways that engage learners every single day.

Given our history and the current demands on us to produce more thoughtful and skilled writers, now is the perfect time for each of us to have a meeting with our writing teacher selves. If the writing revolution is to happen, we must lay our cards on the table and have an honest discussion with ourselves about what is in our control to change. And make no mistake about it: The power to do the right thing is in your hands, regardless of outside forces. When the classroom door closes and the roar of the testing community fades, what happens inside is either magic or business as usual. Our "writing teacher mojo" must be fully engaged for students to thrive and then, yes, they will do well on the inevitable tests.

Here's how to get started: Call a meeting with your writing teacher self. Set a date and time and stick with it; don't put it off or allow other important events to interfere. Make a firm commitment. Next, plan the agenda.

Here's one agenda you might use for your writing teacher meeting:

1. Consider how well your students write and how you know.
2. Reflect on what you know about and how comfortable you are teaching writing.
3. Make a decision to stop doing what doesn't work and start doing what does.
4. Zero in on one practice that energizes you and your students and results in strong writing from them.

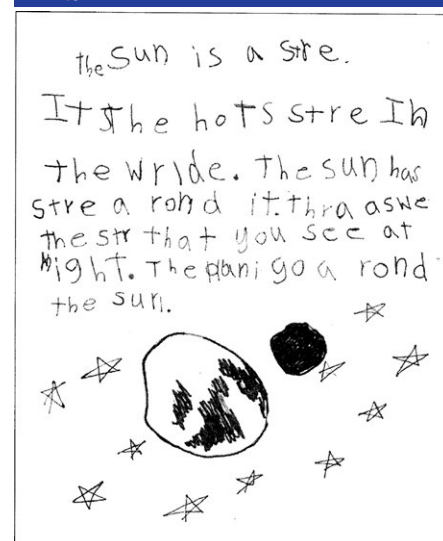
5. Name one practice that you and your students despise—and make a commitment to change it or lose it.
6. Spread the word. Pick a professional book on writing to read and discuss with colleagues.

1. Consider How Well Your Students Write and How You Know

Use these traits to assess student work: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. (You'll find scoring guides for all grade levels at my website. Go to <http://www.culhamwriting.com/LIBRARY/RESOURCES/scoringguides.html>) Learn how to read the writing. In doing so, you'll come to understand what students know and do well and what students don't know or do as well. Try this: Which of these informational pieces by a first-grade writer, "Beyoncé" (Figure 1) or "Stars" (Figure 2), is "better"? What is your criteria for deciding?

"Better" depends on what you are looking for. Let's just consider two of

Figure 2 "Stars" by a First-Grade Writer



the traits: ideas and conventions. The “Beyoncé” piece reveals nice control over conventions, but it reveals little about the idea. The writer doesn’t share anything particularly interesting or original about Beyoncé. On the other hand, the “Stars” piece reveals insightful and original information about the sun and stars, but the writer has little control over conventions. Both of these writers are skilled—just in different ways. To help them take the next step on their writing journeys, we’d need to have completely different conversations with them and provide different feedback.

Action Item. Download the scoring guide for your grade from my website and practice on a set of papers. Don’t worry if it goes slowly at first—that’s expected. It takes time to internalize the leveled criteria and apply them, but it’s worth every minute. Find a willing partner to score the papers with you. Then, compare your scores and resolve any that are more than one point apart. Think about how you will reinforce what is going well for each student and how you will nudge him or her forward in areas that are not going as well. Hint: “Good job” and “Nice work” won’t get the job done.

2. Reflect on What You Know About and How Comfortable You Are Teaching Writing

Let’s face it: Very few of us were blessed with really great writing instruction when we were children, took courses in college taught by forward-thinking professors, and are now members of a writing project. So, most of us wind up teaching writing the way we were taught: skill and drill, isolated practice activities, conventions overkill. We know, however, that best practices have emerged in the last few decades and

that we must embrace them. We need to learn more about them and implement strategically: writing process, writing traits, writing modes, and writing workshop. Our students deserve nothing less.

Action Item. Ask for support from your administrator to attend a workshop or conference; shadow a confident, successful writing teacher in your building; have grade-level meetings to scrutinize the existing curriculum; co-teach lessons with another staff member; sign up for an online course by a reputable source (read: Beware the charlatans), or establish a professional learning community (PLC) to discuss a professional text or video on teaching writing. Attend a writing project. Look up where one is being held in your part of the world and go! In other words, do something big or small to move the needle and gain confidence and skill. It will make a difference.

3. Make a Decision to Stop Doing What Doesn’t Work and Start Doing What Does

Tough love: Stop doing worksheets and packets...formulas...fill-in activities...senseless sentence starters...pointless prompts. They don’t create strong writers. In fact, in my experience, they create weak writers by depriving students of the writing process, where original thinking and problem solving matter. Any method that provides a simple answer or implies that it makes writing “easy to learn” is misleading

and damaging. Ditch it. For the sake of young writers everywhere, embrace the idea that thinking and writing are how students learn to write.

Action Item. Create writing folders in which students store two to four pieces of their own work to practice what you’ve taught them. In other words, make your students’ own work their new “worksheets.” This approach has the advantage of being individual, differentiated, and manageable—not to mention the long-known and long-acknowledged fact that when students practice skills on their own work, they are more likely to understand and internalize those skills. Begin by modeling using pieces of your own from a folder so students see how an experienced writer revises and edits. Walk them through your own revision and editing processes in bite-sized pieces.

4. Zero In on One Practice That Energizes You and Your Students

Think about what lights up the eyes of your student writers and results in strong writing from them. Maybe it is a topic that a handful of students can’t stop talking about or asking questions about. Perhaps it’s a mentor text that shows students firsthand how an expert tackles a tricky area of writing and inspires them to try that new technique in their own work. Or it could be the use of student-friendly scoring guides (available on my website) that help students

“Tough love: Stop doing worksheets and packets...formulas...fill-in activities...senseless sentence starters...pointless prompts. They don’t create strong writers.”

*“You influence
students’ views of
themselves as writers
more than anyone else.”*

see the big and small picture of what they are shooting for. The sky’s the limit for what works for student writers. They give you hints every day.

Action Item. Pick one idea that intrigues you and develop it further. For example, if you select mentor texts, search your classroom library for possibilities. Look for examples of trait-specific writing skills in action and flag them to use in writing instruction, one text at a time. Consider using a color-coding system for each trait and putting a sticker on the book’s spine. You might go so far as to write on the inside cover, “Pages 11–12, fluent passage with complex sentence structure,” or “Nice use of details on pages 3–5.” Then reshelve the book for students to use in other ways, but it’s been stickered for your particular teaching purposes.

5. Commit to Changing or Losing One Practice That You and Your Students Despise

You probably have many ideas for this agenda item. Choose something that really bugs you. Here’s an example: Teaching writing requires many hours of reading and responding to students’ work, no matter the grade or skill level. You likely spend time at school and even more time at home marking papers and then, after you return those papers, students survey the marks, check the grade, and file them away. You spend 10 minutes or more on each paper, and

students react to your well-intentioned observations in about 10 seconds—then don’t do much, if anything, with them. Frustrating, to say the least.

Action Item. No student can attend to every single thing about writing at once. So, don’t provide too much feedback, and do it during the writing process instead of afterward, when you are grading the paper for a final score. Your feedback will be more meaningful and useful, and it will take less time. Give each student one specific target that helps with revision and one that helps with editing for conventions. Tip: Once a paper is “finished” and you and the writer have no intention of returning to it to do additional revision and editing, give a final grade, score, or comment and leave it at that. Indicate one area the student handled well and one area for him or her to work on. Done. One last thought: Be sure to bring parents on board with how you mark papers and why.

6. Pick a Professional Book on Writing to Read and Discuss With Colleagues

There are high-quality professional books and resources to help you sort out whatever issues are most pressing in your writing teacher life: writing process, writing traits, writing modes, writing workshop. And it’s powerful to read, think, talk, and plan with others. So, if you can read a great professional book with colleagues, the ideas will flow and new ones will emerge. Energy to teach writing can be found between the pages of the best books and through the discussions we have as professional educators.

Action Item. This is the fun part. Browse publishers’ websites, look on Pinterest, and talk to colleagues to find a book that directly addresses writing instruction issues you want help to

solve. A book that is “old,” such as one by Donald Graves or Donald Murray, can ground you in the pedagogy. A book that is “new” can show you how to connect that pedagogy to today’s writing classroom. If you read the book with just one colleague, it’s fine. But if you can set up a school-wide PLC, it’s an opportunity to talk and think with others while you are reading—a rich experience for all.

Final Thoughts

Of all the issues that arise during your meeting, pick one to tackle first, and do it with gusto. Taking on every issue simultaneously is a daunting and, most likely, doomed task. But if you choose one issue, think about it, write about it, and make efforts to improve upon it, you’re more likely to see results quickly and gain momentum to take on other issues.

The meeting you have with your writing teacher self will yield many positive and exciting ways to energize your instruction. You influence students’ views of themselves as writers more than anyone else. You owe it to them, and to yourself, to gain confidence and skill as a writing teacher. As initiatives such as your state’s standards and tests loom large, don’t forget: It’s learning to write well that matters most. Always.

REFERENCES

- Graves, D.H. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work*. Exeter, NH: Heinemann.
- Murray, D.M. (1985). *A writer teaches writing* (2nd ed.). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2012). *The nation’s report card: Writing 2011* (NCES 2012-470). Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges. (2003). *The neglected “R”: The need for a writing revolution*. Retrieved from www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/writingcom/neglectedr.pdf